

Epilogue

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This has been a rich discussion and presentation of what amounts to a broad survey of architecture, with an emphasis on the Islamic world, and especially Iran. There have also been presentations of significant architectural developments elsewhere in the world.

Though a number of issues have been raised, and a variety of technical and theoretical subjects discussed, all of these have a common theme that has formed a backdrop, tying them one to another by providing a context. Each of the presentations and sessions have, in effect, dealt with different ways of addressing the same question: how do we define the kind of architecture we want? How do we determine where we are and where we are, or should be, going?

Charles Jencks summarised this in a provocative manner in his presentation by asking, or rather asserting, that we are at a point of “paradigm shift”. Where does an architectural paradigm come from? What brings it about? Firstly, it is the quality of architectural practice, thought and discourse that gives the architecture a direction, a structure. The coherence and the quality of architecture in a country or in a region at any given time is a function of, and determined by, the main forces that give it shape and direction – architectural education, professional bodies, building and development control, legislation, and of course, the clients.

Nader Ardalan spoke of the role of clients, and the public at large, in stimulating architectural response. The more debate, discussion and dialogue there is between those concerned, the better architecture will become. Secondly, the architectural paradigm is strengthened or weakened by the actions of those involved in architecture. Each time we are involved in architecture, whatever the context, we have to make a decision that influences the paradigm – not just locally, but perhaps globally, if we accept the interconnectedness of the ‘butterfly effect’. The architect has to steer a course between a number of options. Like sailors, he can either remain in the shipping lanes, or use a compass to guide himself through uncharted waters. Such a course may prove profitable and exciting, or dangerous and difficult. However, instead of the pull of the magnetic field, architects are guided by four tensions that act simultaneously. These are:

- the tension between local and global factors – are architects responding to and desiring to be judged by local values, cultures and needs, or do they ignore these, and seek to emulate the best architects, and look to them for recognition and respect?

- the tension between conventional technologies and traditional materials, and cutting edge technologies and materials;
- the tension between architecture and the other arts and sciences. Should we form our notions of nature and the way it works by borrowing metaphors from the other disciplines? Charles Jencks suggests that unless architects want to appear antediluvian, they must revamp their view of the universe;
- the tension between standing out and blending in – should buildings acknowledge and respond to those that surround them? The ultimate blending in might be considered the glazed façades that have no form of their own and literally reflect their surroundings; or should architects deliberately make a statement? Ken Yeang responds that if you were designing in Beijing's Forbidden City, you certainly would not want it to stand out. On the other hand, Jencks showed us the work of architects that very definitely make a contribution to shifting the architectural paradigm.

These are not tensions that need to, or can, be resolved in a once and for all manner. Nor would the resolution of one tension automatically restrict the options in the others. Thus it is possible to design for a global audience using traditional materials in a way that stands out from its surroundings, and in a way that responds to the 'Jumping Universe'. The art is in how to resolve these in a responsible yet outstanding way. It is the many decisions being made by designers that come together in what one may call 'similar difference' that produces a paradigm.

Charles Jencks has said that he discerns the coming together of these similar differences in a discernable direction, leading to a paradigm shift. If we observe the very pluralistic nature of society, however, unless we take a very ethno-centric view of our world, what we have is actually a 'paradigm drift'.

Finally, to bring about paradigm shift, or even paradigm drift, we need to circulate information about new ideas and directions. Often in the other arts there is an avant-garde, an often illicit, underground movement – an art-house film or non-commercial trend that explores new ideas. What is the equivalent in architecture if we cannot put up a building? The equivalent is the project, which can be produced without a client and in defiance of regulations and restrictions if need be.

The Modern Movement owes much to the architectural project, especially by young, then-unknown architects, and that tradition has continued with Archigram or Zaha Hadid for example. How can we encourage the dissemination of the requisite knowledge of projects that might be required for an actual paradigm shift to occur? Here, as in other fields, the use of computers and the Internet is proving to be a boon: not only is it easier to produce a more convincing project, it is becoming much easier to pass work around. The ArchNet programme provides a platform and

an opportunity to do this, but we also need to find other ways for young architects to explore alternatives and influence future paradigms.

Akram Abu Hamdan said that the vision of Charles Jencks is elitist because he uses the architecture of 'superstars' to prove his points. While these are wonderful buildings, they are all self-expressive and perhaps even self-indulgent. It is thus difficult to label them under a single banner, such as that of a paradigm shift. The point that Akram Abu Hamdan wanted to raise was whether there is room for such self-expression. He asked whether we are collectively trying to break out of the conventional, out of the confines or discipline of the grid. Is it, as Jencks says, that we are trying to simulate nature? The question that needs to be asked is, rather, why are we doing that? And even if we are, why are we using such precision computer-based technologies and such very complex tools to turn regular shapes into complex shapes? Nature evolved without recourse to such complexity, so to what extent can architects really use these complex technologies to imitate nature? Is this being sincere or is it merely a superficial diversion?

Akram Abu Hamdan went on to say that in Ardalan's work the ideas presented are very appealing, but is the client really the great patron, the driving force behind architectural excellence? Abu Hamdan's experience was that clients mostly do not know what they are talking about. For him the question was, more often than not: should I educate the client or obediently give form to their desires by delivering what they want or have described? For example, if the client wants something modern, should he give them a modern building or one based on traditional architecture?

Ali Saremi said that he recalled the time when Charles Jencks was talking about another paradigm shift in architecture, the one he famously called Post-Modernism. In 1974 during probably the last major seminar in Tehran, with the participation of Louis Kahn, James Stirling, Denise Scott-Brown, there was discussion of the paradigm shift towards Post-Modern architecture. Comparing that period to this one, it might be said that there were some similarities. Between architecture, and architectural education, there was to some extent, a consensus. But now the times have changed so much, there is a pluralism of styles and opinions, so that what is right and wrong, or good and bad in architecture, cannot readily be decided. There is a broad range of work and ideas, and that makes it very difficult to find agreement.

Darab Diba said that there is a need to focus on social, human oriented architecture. The question for modern architecture is how can we, through architecture, provide the basic conditions for people in need and those living in atrocious social conditions? He found it difficult to reconcile grandiose and opulent architecture, such as that of the Bilbao Guggenheim by Frank Gehry, with the very poor conditions under which so many people are living around the world. To him this was marginal architecture as far as the real world was concerned. He said that that morning there had been

long sessions of the Juries for the main building of the Iranian Ministry of Oil. Substantially different projects were presented in the competition, and there were many different identities, cultures, contexts and technologies involved. Jencks would be pleased to know that there was even a 'Blob'!

In contrast, in 1962 there was Louis Kahn's winning project for the National Assembly in Dacca that was both appropriate and responsive. In thinking about good architecture, especially monuments and competition projects, good architecture is needed; whether socially oriented or an act of self-expression, both are needed. For example, Hassan Fathy was a modest person, working with the people of Gourni in Egypt, but what he produced was another approach to architecture. We cannot restrict ourselves to a single definition of the appropriate path for architecture.

Should they have to choose between one or the other type of architect, between a self-expressive designer or a social architect, or should both be considered legitimate? Darab Diba responded that life imposes its own challenges, and we respond to them. That is human nature, and to respond to something larger than oneself, one must give something. This idea of receiving and giving is the process of gaining acceptance. It also leads to my idea of being responsible as an architect. We need to be both self-expressive and socially responsible.

The Aga Khan Award has done a noble task, but it has focused almost exclusively on social need. When one comes to Tehran or Kuwait City or anywhere else in the Islamic world, the Award does not give the prominence required to major landmarks in those cities: the airports, shopping centres, office blocks, the form-giving projects. The Award has opted out of these form-giving projects. While recognising good architecture, the Award must also give direction. What Jencks calls "cosmogogenesis" as an opening of the mind: reality is not a factory working on auto-pilot, it needs nurturing. It is a pity that in the Islamic world we have to receive our ideas of form from the likes of Norman Foster. The Award should not only concentrate on small projects and everyday architecture, but also on the major, formal building types.

Akram Abu Hamdan asked if there is no good and no bad in architecture; does that mean that anything goes? Diba responded that you try to do "your own thing" and to accept the views of others. The 'high-tech' approach of Norman Foster is contributing to civilisation, and so also is an architect working at the opposite end of the spectrum. We cannot categorise architecture into good or bad.

Jencks refers to the question of functional right or wrong that still gives architecture its value, but this question has become very hard to judge. Pluralism makes criticism very difficult, let alone saying what is right or wrong. Even in painting, there is a vast variety of styles, and they have the same problems. The real paradigm of this century is to find your own broad way between right and wrong.

Should we be accepting of all architecture, or should it be aiming at some particular objectives? If so, we need to state why, how, and what those objectives are. Perhaps the need for openness is more important than setting absolute standards. A respondent in the audience said that there have been long and fruitless discussions in Iran aimed at trying to understand culture and cultural issues. "We Iranians," he said, "don't need stagnation, we need to deal with global issues, and we need to open the country to new ways of expressing architecture." He went on to say that "Jencks' case is entirely about image – that is not what good or bad architecture is about. It is about experience, the planet and the human race. It is absolutely insane to use nature to judge architecture. Nature is entirely indifferent to us, it is up to us to respond and relate to nature."

Another respondent from the floor said that an important question for architects is how to look at nature and how to deal with nature. If the paradigm shift seems to be a logical result of the mechanistic view, then the paradigm we should be looking for is something in opposition to this scientific determinism. We need to look for some freedom of expression, to relate to the scale and needs of humans, and of urban society. Some architects, like Frank Gehry, have tried to create models of sculpture, while others, such as Norman Foster, have used science. By doing this we are getting closer to such a paradigm. This is something that has already been lost in the modern movement. The basis of the discussion should be: how far can we get back to the base of nature and closer to nature?

A commentator mentioned that Karl Popper in his *Open Society* said that the future is unknown and unknowable: in other words, if someone knows what will happen, they could prevent it; therefore it might not or could not happen. Thus we cannot suggest any form for future architecture, but only for contemporary architecture, for our own times, not for the future.

Another contributor to the debate noted that architecture is about experiences, of things, and of people. These are the underlying issues. When Jencks speaks of different traditions, we are being unkind if we say we are only looking at the images, since there are underlying issues that go along with them. We should see the image with the concept and idea behind it. We need to look at both together, and if we can try to do that, then we can see architecture in a more positive way.

The issues raised were not simple, and cannot be resolved easily, let alone in the context of a single seminar. However, the first step to the resolution of some of the questions is to open dialogue and debate.

For photographs of the seminar sessions, the reader is referred to pls. 164-170.



164.



165.



166.



167.

164. Participants in Yazd.

165. Ali Reza Sami Azar.

166. Pirooz Hanachi.

167. Seyyed Mohammad Beheshti.



168.



169.

168. A crowd, consisting in good part of students, awaits entry to a seminar session in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

169. Front row in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. From left to right, Nassim Sharipov, Charles Jencks, Ali Reza Sami Azar, Sémia Akrouit-Yaïche, Selma al-Radi and Suha Özkan.

170. Sessions in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.



170.